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The Real Story

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Issues in Nomination of Robert Gates as CIA Director

BARBARA NEVINS: Coming up: Will this man become America's next spymaster? The real story on Robert Gates next.

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NEVINS: First up tonight, we turn our attention to Capitol Hill and the controversy surrounding President Bush's choice to head up the CIA.

BOYD MATSON: In the middle of September the Senate will begin hearings on the nomination of Robert Gates to be the new head of Central Intelligence. That nomination, however, has been trouble from the beginning because of allegations that Gates knows more than he's told about the Iran-Contra scandal.

Joining us now to talk about Gates' prospects are, from Washington, George Carver, Jr. from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and from Chicago, Joe Bleifuss, a columnist for the paper In These Times.

Welcome to both of you. Thanks for joining us on The Real Story.

Mr. Bleifuss, let me begin with you. You have written much about Mr. Gates, saying that he has known from the beginning what was going on in the Iran-Contra scandal, and that perhaps he was even involved in the 1980 Reagan-Bush campaign effort to keep hostages held longer in Iran, until after the election.

If any of that is true, why, why would President Bush take a chance on having it exposed and nominating Mr. Gates to be head of the CIA?

JOEL BLEIFUSS: I think one possible explanation is that, as we see, there are upcoming investigations of the alleged October Surprise and various other scandals, the shipment of arms to Iraq in the mid-'80s, in which case he's also alleged to be involved. And I think that, in a sense, if the CIA is going to be coming under such close scrutiny in the next year, with a variety of congressional investigations, it's very important for the Administration to have somebody in place who can handle that end of the work, you know, dealing with Congress.

And up until recently, I think Gates had a fairly good relationship with Congress. That is now in question, with the various revelations that are coming out of Lawrence Walsh's investigation in Washington.

MATSON: Mr. Carver, is there anything that makes you at all suspicious that perhaps Mr. Gates knows more, knew more than he's told Congress in the past?

GEORGE CARVER: No, there really isn't. And allegations, we should remember are not, in our legal system, proof. I mean this whole business of an October Surprise, let's keep that in proportion. Ronald Reagan trounced Jimmy Carter by 440 electoral votes. So it was not a stolen election. And at the time of the alleged October Surprise, Gates was the Executive Assistant to Stansfield Turner, who was Carter's appointee as Director of Central Intelligence. And he could hardly have gone flitting off from Turner's office to go have clandestine meetings in Paris or anywhere else with people trying to euchre the election for Ronald Reagan. I mean anybody who'd believe that is smoking something other than tobacco.

Now, I think that all the other allegations -- I mean Gates was the Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. Bill Casey kept him deliberately out of the loop, as Directors of Central Intelligence have frequently kept their Deputies out of the loop, ran the Iran-Contra out of his own hip pocket. And Gates had almost no involvement in it and knew very little about it, and that was by Casey's deliberate design.

So, Iran-Contra, you can say waht you want to about it, but don't blame Bob Gates for Bill Casey's actions.

MATSON: Hasn't Mr. Gates indicated that while he was at the CIA he was fairly much acting as the Director, that he was in charge, new what was going on, he had a good handle on it, and that's why he deserves to be in charge now? Now he's in the

position of saying, "Well, I didn't know everything."

CARVER: Well, let's be a little careful, in that when he was up for his confirmation hearings to be Deputy Director in 1986, he flatly stated that when he became Deputy Director he was going to make it a point to know everything that the CIA did. When I heard that statement I smiled, as I suspect Bill Casey did also, because I've known Bill Casey for a lot longer than Bob Gates had known him. Casey was a very secretive fellow. He had cut his teeth in intelligence, running agents into Nazi Germany out of London during World War II. And he, I think, handpicked Gates for several reasons, far from the least being that Gates had no operational experience, no background in covert operations, and hence would be one that would be fairly easy to contain or cut out of a sensitive operational activity that Casey did not want Gates or anybody else in the Agency, institutionally, to be involved in.

Now, he used Alan Fiers and he used various Agency officers, but he made it a point to run Contra out of the White House, not out of the Central Intelligence Agency.

MATSON: Joel Bleifuss, where's the smoking gun? Where's the evidence that connects Gates?

BLEIFUSS: I'd like to respond to that. I think that's nonsense. When Gates was before the Senate Intelligence Committee in 1986, being asked questions about his work with Casey

and that, he said, quote, "Casey and I have consulted extensively, even in my present position, in all areas of intelligence policy, including not just analysis and estimates, but also organization, budgeting and covert action. I will now have a formal role in all of these areas." End quote.

And I would like to go back to what Mr. Carver had said earlier about Gates being involved in the alleged October Surprise. I think that it is true he was Executive Assistant to Stansfield Turner at the time, who was Carter's Director of the CIA. But if one remembers that in 1983 the Albosta Report investigated the theft of the Carter briefing books from the White House into the campaign of Ronald Reagan, and at that time it was suspected that there was somebody within the Carter White House who was providing privileged information to the campaign, Two people who are prime suspects, in my opinion, are Donald Gregg and Robert Gates, both of whom, when Reagan became President, went on to have meteoric rises within the intelligence community and the Administration.

And I think that Congress needs to look at these issues very carefully when Gates's is nomination comes up in September. And I would be willing to be almost anything that he will not be confirmed and that he will withdraw his name before it gets to that point.

CARVER: Well, that's a bet I...

MATSON: Mr. Carver, the evidence is there that Robert

Gates was getting reports on all the surveillance memorandum that was coming through the CIA early in 1986.

CARVER: Well, what do you mean by surveillance memoranda? I mean Robert Gates in early 1986 was the DDCI, but I do not...

BLEIFUSS: The number two man at the Agency.

CARVER: No, he was not the number two man at the Agency. This is a common...

BLEIFUSS: Oh, that's right. He was head of intelligence.

CARVER: No. In 1986, I believe, he was already Deputy Director of Central Intelligence. And people tend to forget that -- they talk about people being the Director of the CIA, a job which does not exist by that title in the U.S. Government.

BLEIFUSS: But earlier in '86 he was confirmed for Deputy Director. Before that he was Director of Intelligence, Deputy Director of Intelligence.

CARVER: He was Deputy Director -- no, Deputy Director for Intelligence. Then he was confirmed as DDCI. But the Deputy Director of Central Intel...

BLEIFUSS: Which is the number two spot.

CARVER: No, it is not the number two spot.

MATSON: Before we get lost in a definition of exactly what his title was, just tell me quickly very much on this point.

Mr. Carver, do you think he'll be confirmed by the Senate?

CARVER: I think he will be confirmed. I think Senator Metzenbaum and Senator Bradley will voice some objections. I think Senator Specter will come in from the wings. Senator Specter was a member of the committee the last time. I think the committee vote -- 15 on the committee -- will probably go 8-7 in favor of Gates, or perceptibly better. I think...

MATSON: And Mr. Bleifuss, how do you see the vote coming down?

BLEIFUSS: Well, I don't think it'll get to a vote. I think he'll withdraw his name before then.

MATSON: All right.

Thank you very much, George Carver, Jr. and Joel Bleifuss from Chicago, for joining us on The Real Story.